“The Lottery”

Taína Bonilla

English 126

Dr. Evelyn Lugo

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**Title:**

The short story I picked is called “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson.

**Author’s Brief Bio:**

Shirley Jackson was born in 1916 in San Francisco, California. She is widely known for her short story “The Lottery” which she published in 1948. She wrote a series of novels which include “The Road through the Wall,” “Hangsaman,” “The Bird’s Nest,” and “The Haunting of Hill House.” She has also written a series of short stories which include “The Lottery,” her most famous, “Call Me Ishmael,” and “My Life with R. H. Macy.” In 1960 she was nominated for the National Book award for “The Haunting of Hill House”; in 1962 she won *Time’s* Best Ten Novels of the year for “We have Always Lived in the Castle”; and in 1966 she won Mystery Writers of America Edgar award for “The Possibility of Evil.” Shirley died in 1965 due to heart failure. Its believed that a combination of her obesity, heavy smoking and prescription drugs, given to treat her psychosomatic illnesses, contributed to her early death, at 48 years of age. After her death her husband published “Come Along with Me” a collection of rare short stories and a few chapters of her unfinished novel (“Shirley Jackson”, 2011).

**Synopsis of Short Story:**

Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” is her most famous. It’s about a village of people set in a modern time during the summer celebrating an old tradition called the Lottery. Throughout the story Jackson tells of the children gathering first in the town square, then the men, then finally the women. Next arrived Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves, the postmaster, with the wooden box used for the lottery. The story states that the people didn’t remember much of how the lottery was conducted and that they had somehow lost the original box used to conduct it. The only person to remember vague details is the oldest person who lived in the village, old Mr. Warner. As Mr. Summers prepares to start the lottery hushed whispers start rolling around the crowd of how other villages have given up the lottery entirely. Mr. Warner clearly states that the idea of giving it up was insane and that it was tradition and one must always stick with tradition. The drawing begins with each head of house drawing for their families. If there is no head of house then the oldest son must do it. When everyone has drawn it is discovered that the Hutchinson family has acquired the “winning lottery ticket,” but they are not thrilled. Mrs. Hutchinson starts complaining of how her husband wasn’t given enough time to pick the piece of paper he wanted. Then there are five pieces of paper put back in the box pertaining to the five members in the family. Next, all five family members pick a paper out of the box and it is determined that the person with the “black spot” on their paper is Mrs. Hutchinson. She tries to convince the crowd that what they were about to do was not right, but they don’t listen and stone her to death (Jackson, 2007).

**Analysis of Literary theories:**

In the short story “The Lottery” there is evidence of surrealism. Literary surrealism features the element of surprise. The story surprises every reader with the ending, when Mrs. Hutchinson is stoned to death, and leaves them feeling confused and questioning the sanity of author. Jackson does this to give the reader something to think about. She implements an ancient tradition into modern times and questions how much of this violence and inhumanity is still left in the modern society? She also writes how Mrs. Hutchinson’s youngest child is given a few pebbles to throw at his mother as well. She questions how much of this cruelty is left in modern society when a family has their home taken away; or when a natural disaster strikes what people are willing to do to survive? The text states the people of the village did not remember the proceedings or the ritual words but they did remember exactly how to carry out the end of the lottery. Jackson does this to show the readers that when it comes to miniscule unimportant details the human mind does not remember, but it does remember how to carry out the brutal violence involved.

The story also shows evidence of structuralism in a modern setting as well as archetypal characters and tendencies. The story is structured in the way that the men are the head of house and women are the last choice if an oldest son does not exist. Old Mr. Warner, the archetypal character, is the village elder that everyone listens to and the villagers keep faithfully to old traditions, archetypal tendencies, set up by their ancestors. The story is also structured by the fact that the men have to pick for their families and that daughters pick with their husband’s family. The death of Mrs. Hutchinson can also be viewed as structured because she was the most out spoken woman of the crowd, the most intolerant. By many readers she can be viewed as the disrespectful woman who doesn’t know her place and therefore should be stoned to death alongside the adulterers as the traitors were crucified and common thieves and criminals were hung. As many religious readers can reach the conclusion that she was possessed and that is the reason for her outburst and may reach the thinking that she was a witch.

The story also shows evidence of reader response as do all types of literature. The type of reader response Jackson was trying to receive was one of shock and aw and probably one of reflection. She was trying to get the reader to reflect upon the amount of cruelty and inhumanity still left in modern society. How maybe modern society is still more violent than in the ancient times. This might be because modern society thinks it’s more sophisticated than the ancients so it might do things “properly” and in secret. This is because it doesn’t want others to think it’s uncivilized therefore it does things in silence and this makes it most cruel and a coward. Better to do things in the open and be cruel than to do things in silence and be a coward. Jackson was most likely trying to show that cruelty we all hide inside and writing something so violent in a modern day world is very shocking and that exactly was her point.

References

Jackson, S. (2007). Classic short stories. *The Lottery.* Retrieved March 24, 2011 from

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